



Namdhari Sikhs

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The Namdhari Sikh Community has been present in the United Kingdom for over four decades. The first person seen wearing a Namdhari style turban, a classical style associated with the Sikh Gurus, was Mr Ajit Singh in 1966 in London. Although there were Sikhs in the United Kingdom who professed beliefs with Namdhari Sikh ideology they were not visually noticeable beforehand. With the first visit of the Namdhari spiritual leader, Satguru Jagjit Singh in 1968, a new energy came into the existing community and a number of Sikh and some non-Sikh families adopted the Namdhari Sikh way of life.

In the 1970s, changes in the East African countries and tightening of the immigration legislation in the United Kingdom led Namdhari Sikh families from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to come to this country, and currently there are sizeable communities in West London, East London, Birmingham, Leicester, Leeds and Southall. The Community Headquarters are in Upton Park in East London and there are Namdhari Sikh Centres in Birmingham, Leeds and Southall, which minister to the needs of approximately five thousand people.

Namdhari Sikh roots as a community

On Vaisakhi Day in April 2007 the Namdhari Sikh community celebrated with tremendous pride 150 years of its existence at Sri Bhaini Sahib, its headquarters in Punjab, India. About a hundred thousand people travelled from different parts of India, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Canada and the United States to participate in the celebration and to reinvigorate themselves with the message and the teachings of Guru Ram Singh, who is also referred to as Baba Ram Singh by the wider Sikh community.

On Vaisakhi Day in 1857, in the footsteps of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, Guru Ram Singh conducted the amrit ceremony to initiate his disciples into the Khalsa Sikh order (also called Sant Khalsa). What is important to mention here is the fact that it was eight years after the annexation of the Sikh Kingdom of Punjab by the British to their Indian Empire, after the defeat of the Sikhs in the two Sikh Wars and the imprisoning of the young Sikh Maharaja Dalip Singh under British custody. Sikh morale was at a very low ebb, corruption and sin were rife and the Sikh principles and symbols were only vaguely understood and hardly practised. Guru Ram Singh rejuvenated the Sikhs by once again teaching the principles of the Sikh faith: namely the worship of the one God, the earning of one's living through honest hard work and the sharing of one's earnings with others. He initiated the Sikhs in Guru Gobind Singh's established tradition and, through the power of prayer and meditation, he renewed their hopes against slavery, internal strife, hopelessness and desolation. He made them self-sufficient and self-reliant, created parallel institutions to those of the colonial British Government for his followers so that they would not use British goods and institutions such as schools, judicial, administrative, financial, postal and transport systems. He also sent his

envoys to the Indian independent states and to foreign governments to get help for India's freedom. He also told his followers that 'violence would not resolve conflicts and win freedoms. Not bullets but (the meditation on) beads of a rosary would achieve aspired solutions.'

In a short space of time his followers increased to millions. The government reacted by putting hundreds of them in prison, torturing them, blowing up seventy-two by cannon fire and exiling Guru Ram Singh to Burma in 1872. Before his departure, Guru Ram Singh instructed his brother (whom he renamed Hari Singh) to keep nurturing the plant of faith and freedom till his return.

Guru Hari Singh, who was placed under house arrest, and his successor Guru Pratap Singh sustained the community through their teaching of prayer and meditation and non-violent struggle for freedom.

After India's Independence in 1947, Guru Pratap Singh and the present Guru Jagjit Singh ministered to the spiritual needs of their followers abroad by visiting them. Guru Jagjit Singh has travelled all over the world and has so far paid thirty-one visits to the UK. In 1976 when there was drought in the UK, he received huge media attention as the 'rainmaker.' I personally saw a billboard put in the roadside corner of a field along the A13 on which was written in big lettering, 'Could the Guru please turn the tap off?'

What every educated person should know about the Namdhari Sikh tradition

The word 'Namdhari' means 'one who has the name of God in his/her heart'. Sometimes Namdhari Sikhs are called 'Kukas' because some of them shriek aloud ('kuka' means cry) when they get into an ecstatic trance while praying and singing devotional hymns.

Other distinctive features of the Namdhari Sikh tradition are as follows:

- The Namdhari Sikhs believe in the continuity of spiritual leadership after the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, which is carried through the Namdhari line of Sikh Gurus, while other Sikhs believe in the leadership having been transferred from the human Guru to the Sikh holy book, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* in 1708. Nevertheless, the teachings of the Gurus as enshrined in *Guru Granth Sahib* and in the scripture of the Tenth Guru, the *Dasam Granth*, are central to the Namdhari Sikh tradition.
- They believe in the unity of creation and of a human being's responsibility towards other life-forms on earth, animals and plants. Life is sacred for animals, too. Therefore, they take great pride in being vegetarians. They also consider being non-smokers and teetotallers as part of their faith. They show particular concern for environmental issues and factory farming and they mainly use natural and organic methods of farming. After the partition of India, poor landless refugees driven from the newly created Pakistan were given thousands of acres of land free by the then Guru Pratap Singh and with their hard work and care that arid land has become very fertile and enabled the community to become prosperous.
- Namdhari Sikhs are pacifists. They do not believe in carrying any weapons. They wear the five Ks, but they have a miniature 'kirpan' (sword) tied to the 'kangha' (comb). Guru Ram Singh is said to have thrown his gun into a river after the British conquest of Punjab and, as mentioned earlier, remarked that freedom and peace will be won by the rosary. The present Guru, Satguru Jagjit Singh, travels worldwide preaching the message

of peace and prayer. He is an ardent speaker for the destruction of weapons and is very concerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. He advocates that peace on earth can only be realised by giving up nuclear and other weapons, encourages and supports peaceful methods of resolving conflict, and stresses meditation and prayer for overcoming violence.

- A woollen handmade rosary of 108 beads is worn round their neck by the more devout persons. It is used for silent meditation by people during congregational meditation. An hour a day is considered good practice as well the reciting of the essential daily prayers which include writings of the Tenth Guru.
- Namdhari Sikhs are enjoined to get up in the small hours of the morning and, after cleansing themselves and showering, to concentrate on worship through meditation and singing of morning hymns in the congregational setting as well as reading their daily prayers.
- Namdhari Sikhs also perform 'havan', lighting of the sacred fire, to purify the elements on special occasions such as the key family or community celebrations.
- Worldwide, the Namdhari Sikhs have a unique reputation for their close observance of the Indian classical musical tradition. The value of musical notation in which the Sikh Holy scripture is written, is authentically maintained in singing and in the playing of musical instruments such as 'diliruba', 'santoor', 'sarod' and 'tabla'. In the UK, this tradition is being kept alive through special teaching arranged by the masters of this craft.
- Namdhari social institutions, as established in the mid-nineteenth century, were ahead of their times, particularly as they challenged societal norms in a concerted way. Khushwant Singh, the well known journalist and author, says in his book *A History of the Sikhs* that Guru Ram Singh issued 'hukamn_m_s' (instructions) to his followers which embraced ethical, social, hygienic as well as political matters:

Ethical: Do not lie, steal or commit adultery.

Personal: Do not imbibe tobacco, alcohol or meat of any kind.

Wear turbans flat across the forehead.

Social: Do not destroy or trade female children.

Do not give girls under 16 in marriage. (Ram Singh performed mass marriages of his followers in village Khote in 1863. He forbade his followers to spend more than 13 rupees at a wedding [equivalent to 10 pence at present].)

Do not give or take dowries.

Do not borrow or lend money on interest.

Protect cows and other animals from slaughter.

Hygienic: Rise before dawn and bathe everyday; (pray and tell beads of rosaries made of wool).

Political: Do not accept service with the government.

Do not send children to government schools.

Do not go to courts of law but settle disputes by reference to panchayats.

Do not use foreign goods.

Do not use the government postal system. (2001:129)

Guru Ram Singh laid special stress on the education for girls both in terms of literacy and in religious education. He also supported the right of widows to remarry.

- In Namdhari Sikh marriages there is more consideration of belonging to this denomination, and caste forms no particular barrier to marriage. McLeod says, 'All Namdharis are at least Kes-dharis. They wear only white homespun clothing...' (1997:190). He further says, 'Fire is...used in marriage celebrations, the couple circumambulating it instead of the Guru Granth Sahib during the course of the ceremony. This was the form current in the path before the introduction of the Anand Marriage order.' (1997:191)

Owen Cole considers the importance of the period between 1857 and 1872 in the following words:

Namdharis had acquired several characteristics during this period. First, they had developed a consciousness of themselves as part of the Indian Independence movement. The Maler Kotla Namdharis were the first large group of Indians to be executed by the British after 1857 and the British had exiled their leader. Second, their theory of guruship is such that they believe in the kind of authority which existed from the time of Guru Arjan and certainly the period of Guru Gobind Singh when a living Guru existed as well as the scripture. Third, as has been noted, they emphasise the social, educational, and economic concern of Sikhism. Fourth, they attach great importance to spiritual and moral development and observance.' (2004: 146)

Namdhari Sikhs have a strong belief that Guru Ram Singh will return one day and then there would be heaven on earth. Therefore, their prayers and meditations revolve round hopes and desires for his return.

Sensitive issues

- Broadly, Namdhari Sikh children face similar difficulties to other Sikhs, especially boys in mainly white areas.
- Namdhari Sikhs are confused with the followers of Osama Bin Laden by the Western communities and individuals because of similar styles of white turbans. As a result they become subjected to abuse and harassment.
- The more orthodox Sikhs with Khalistani views may attack Namdhari Sikhs as not conforming to the tradition as they understand it or interpret it. This could result in playground or classroom tensions.
- In most RE books and books about the Sikhs, there is a tendency to describe the Sikhs as a martial class, a warrior race with the culture of carrying swords and guns. Teachers may not know that pacifism also has a place in Sikhi (Sikhism). The Namdhari Sant Khalsa tradition is about saintliness, pacifism and spirituality.
- Teachers may find that some children come to school tired and find concentrating difficult. This may be because some very devout families wake up children very early in the morning for meditation and prayer and so they may not have had sufficient sleep.

The importance of Namdhari Sikh beliefs in the 21st century

The teachings related to the code of conduct are universal and are not bound by time. They apply to life in the 21st century as they did in the 19th century and would continue to do so in the next millennium:

- Treating all men and women as equal regardless of social or caste background. In India, and also among the Indian communities in the West, the increasing pressure on girls' families for elaborate weddings and dowries jeopardises the whole notion of equality. The tradition of simple weddings in which no dowry is exchanged reduces inequity and promotes equality between families and so has a special role in society. Furthermore, as modern medical technology is being used for gender identification and a significant number of female foetuses are being aborted (so much so that in the Punjab the male to female ratio is 1000 to 853) and some private clinics are also involved in the UK, the situation is getting grimmer. It is heartening to note that the present Guru Jagjit Singh reminds people of their responsibilities, of the sacredness of human life and of the teachings of Guru Ram Singh to protect girl babies (and foetuses).
- Maintaining a balance between spiritual life and personal care is very relevant to dealing with the stresses and strains of modern life. Meditation and prayer are increasingly recognised as having merit in healing and improving well being.
- Belief in non-violent methods of resolving conflict has proven to be a worthwhile tool in freedom movements in many parts of the world and has value in the present world.
- Treating all life forms with respect, not using chemicals in the soil for food production but developing and sustaining organic methods of farming indicates the tradition's environmental role.
- Maintaining a vegetarian way of life and not partaking of intoxicants such as alcohol, drugs and smoking. In the UK the government, health authorities, local authorities and police spend huge sums of money in promoting healthy life styles and in countering the adverse effects of drugs, drink and smoking on people. A faith-based approach has its own value in stopping young people from going on that road, but there are tremendous peer pressures on young people.
- Keeping to the moral code of truthfulness, not to lie or steal or deceive others. Other religions also give similar instructions.
- The present Guru and Namdhari Sikhs maintain very good relations with other faith traditions. Their co-operation with Hindu and Muslim artists is legendary in the musical heritage and there is a strong emphasis on teaching classical music and instruments. Musical concerts bring people from diverse background together, such is their impact.

Finally, it is useful to note that the Sikh tradition, like other religious traditions, is not monolithic but contains significant diversity within it. Children and young people may not be able to articulate that diversity or even their commonality fully. Furthermore, there are few sources in English and most lay more emphasis on the political heritage and less on the spiritual or social aspects of it. I list below some relevant sources for further study and research.

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Useful websites

www.namdhari.org

www.namdharisangatuk.org

www.namdhari-world.com

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